

National History Day 2009 Theme:

# The Individual in History: Actions and Legacies

by Cathy Gorn

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During the 2008-2009 school year National History Day invites students to research topics related to the theme *The Individual in History: Actions and Legacies*. A combination of the right person at the right time in history has powerful outcomes which can be both inspiring and catastrophic as illustrated by the lives of such figures as George Washington, Winston Churchill, Abraham Lincoln, Mahatma Gandhi, Rachel Carson, Cesar Chavez, Jane Addams, or Idi Amin Dada and Adolf Hitler. Inspirational individuals ask difficult questions of society and themselves and believe passionately in an issue. Examples of individuals who cared deeply about a cause and nudged history forward are Eleanor Roosevelt in her quest for human rights, John Peter Zenger and the fight for freedom of the press, and Walter Reed in his quest for a cure for yellow fever. The list can extend exponentially. Individuals who were activists, world leaders, scientists, or artists followed their fervor and focused their life's work that eventually became a catalyst for events to unfold in history. In each case the decisions and the route that the individual followed ignited a change.

Many individuals in history were not famous—or infamous—and their names are lost to history. But often, such individuals played significant roles in the course of human events: a foot soldier in the Battle of Normandy on D-Day during World War II; a pioneer woman on the Oregon Trail; or a voter registration activist in Mississippi during Freedom Summer 1964. How did each contribute to a larger event or movement that changed history?

The individuals your students select may illustrate important values, such as courage in the face of great opposition or in striking out in a new direction; selflessness in helping others during a time of disaster; ingenuity in founding or building an institution; patriotism in time of national crisis; or leadership in a cooperative effort to protect human rights or improve the community.

In 1789 George Washington was the individual unanimously selected to be our first president. Why? What traits and talent did he possess to make him a great leader? How did he use his talents to shape his presidency and the new nation? In 1962 Rachel Carson wrote *Silent Spring*, a book

associated with the launch of the environmentalist movement. Rachel Carson wrote about insecticides when few people were aware of the danger. Why did she pursue her concern when the wider audience of the nation was unconcerned with pesticides and their danger? What other obstacles, besides national apathy, did she overcome? What inner strength did she possess to persevere and make new discoveries to make people aware? How did she eventually gain the attention of so many? What impact did her book have on history?

History and the story of individuals and groups of individuals cannot be separated. One person does not stand alone, isolated in time, but

is a product of the events and the people that came before and those who were influenced by history. Susan B. Anthony was influenced by her environment and her historical context as she was born into a large family of abolitionists. Her deep

religious upbringing and her passion for equality began a national conversation that eventually brought about change for women. Anthony and her desire for equality were preceded by the abolitionist movement and women like Sojourner Truth who spoke out for equal rights. Elizabeth Cady Stanton joined and worked alongside Susan B. Anthony and both were followed in the fight for equal rights by suffragettes like Alice Paul. Each woman persevered in her belief and followed a different path to the same goal, the 19th Amendment. In what way did each individual's efforts eventually lead to a change in the social and legal status for women?

Queen Elizabeth I, Joan of Arc, and Florence Nightingale represent women in world history who defied the conventional wisdom and behavior of their societies. Choosing one of these famous women can reveal how each reacted against or transformed male dominated societies. Rosie the Riveter was a symbol of women during World War II. How was a lesser known individual from your own community, like a woman who worked in a factory during World War II, instrumental in expanding the roles of women?

Whether the individual was a diplomat, a politician, or an everyday person, the plight of the individual affects us all. The individual is the force behind history. How does an individual change history? Events that have changed the course of history are often associated with an individual or



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a group of individuals with the same goal. The abolitionists of the 19th century represented distinct ideologies about how to end slavery. William Wilberforce believed that through the political system the institution of slavery would be changed. John Brown relied on emotion and violence. William Garrison employed rational thought and an appeal to the public conscience through the newspaper.

Students should remember that understanding time and place are crucial to examining an individual's role in history. Sometimes the individual is a catalyst for the events examined. People make history. Jackie Robinson and Marian Anderson are excellent examples of individuals being at the right place at the right time in history. Through their desire to pursue their dreams, they achieved a great, but maybe unintended, step in the Civil Rights movement. In 1947 Jackie Robinson broke through the racial barrier to become the first black baseball player to play in the major leagues. Why was this possible in 1947? He had been playing baseball for years before 1947. So why didn't this happen in 1936 or 1940? What obstacles did he face before and after he signed with the Dodgers? How did his example set a precedent for other athletes in other sports?

In 1939 Marian Anderson was refused the right to sing at Constitution Hall because of segregation policies. She eventually sang on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial after Eleanor Roosevelt resigned from the Daughters of the American Revolution who blocked Anderson from singing there. Even the decision for the concert to be moved to the Lincoln Memorial caused a backlash of criticism. A section of the population saw her consent to sing on the Lincoln Memorial as a great success, and another section of the population felt her decision to sing caved in to the segregation policies. Why and how was Eleanor Roosevelt a significant player in this event?

Students who are interested in ancient history may discuss Xerxes and Pericles as symbols of the early clash between east and west, or the attitudes of Caesar and Brutus toward republicanism in ancient Rome, or Eleanor of Aquitaine and the medieval development of France and England. What was the context of the time in which each lived? How did

that context influence the individual's success or failure? What impact did the individual's actions have on the course of history?

The history of science and technology represents another fascinating area of study. Students might investigate not only the effect of an individual on scientific knowledge, technological development, and societal change, but also the impact of science and technology on the individual. In what way was Galileo's discovery controversial? What impact did his discovery have? What were the consequences of his work? How did his work influence history?

Can art influence history? Students might examine the influence photography has had on history. How did Mathew Brady's photographs of the Civil War inform and influence the nation's perception of war between the north and south? Students might follow Lewis Hine's photos of child labor leading to the Keating-Owen Act or Dorothea Lange's famous photographs of the migrants during the Dust Bowl.

## Historical Relevance

As with any NHD theme, these topics present students with many fascinating opportunities to explore history and to learn to use a wide range of primary and secondary sources. This year's theme also offers teachers an excellent entry into philosophical discussions about personal actions and responsibilities.

Stories of individuals in history are compelling but pose a challenge for a National History Day project. While working with a theme, students must move beyond biographies and descriptions of specific people or events and demonstrate how that person's actions had an impact on history. The challenge for students engaged in a National History Day project with the theme of *The Individual in History* is to capture that specific moment in time in which change occurred and the role played by an individual. As with any NHD theme, the key to good historical study is an examination of cause and effect and change over time.



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Refer to web site for local contest dates and information. National Contest: June 14-18, 2009